

Dorea Hall Pittman, representing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), at a conference in Reno on June 6, 1964 charged that “if Arizona is the Alabama, Nevada is the Mississippi of the West, and Utah is the Georgia.”

By the 1950s, some journalists and critics had labeled Nevada the “Mississippi of the West.” The pejorative label was also applied to Las Vegas, Hawthorne, and Reno. An article in the March 1954 edition of *Ebony Magazine* entitled “Negroes can't win in Las Vegas” resulted in the town being called “the Mississippi of the West.”



Was Nevada burning like Mississippi? Had Nevadans resorted to mob violence and lynched African-Americans; burned or bombed their homes, schools, businesses, and churches; killing hundreds of innocent men, women, and children? Were there incidents comparable to the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till; NAACP leader Medgar Evers; civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman; and civil rights leader Vernon Dahmer?

The answer is clearly no. The late Elmer Rusco, University of Nevada, Reno, political science professor and long-time civil rights activist, noted in his oral history, *Not Like A River* (2004), that calling Nevada the Mississippi of the West “was a misnomer, it wasn’t fair, but Nevada was worse than most Western states, certainly worse than California in many respects.”

Nevada’s brand of racism was less embedded in law and not as violent as in southern states. For example, according to the Tuskegee Institute Archives, 539 blacks were lynched in Mississippi between 1882 and 1968, the highest number among all states and territories. In the same time period, no blacks were lynched in Nevada, one of only seven states that had no history of lynching African-Americans.

However, until 1959, it was illegal for blacks and whites to marry. Segregated communities were the norm. Discrimination in employment was rampant; generally the most menial jobs were available to blacks. African-Americans were denied service in most businesses, including hotels, restaurants, and casinos. Hawthorne’s El Capitan Hotel and Casino was notorious for refusing service to blacks and American Indians.

There were very few African-American teachers, lawyers, doctors, or politicians in Nevada until after the 1960s. Entertainers such as Sammy Davis, Jr.; Pearl Bailey; Lena Horne; Harry Belafonte; and Nat King Cole played to standing room only white audiences in Las Vegas after World War II, only to find themselves humiliated when escorted post-performance out a back door and transported to accommodations on the segregated Westside. Las Vegas’ high profile as the “Entertainment Capital of the World” was tarnished by such practices. On a smaller scale, Reno, “The Biggest Little City in the World,” had a miserable track record when it came to race relations. No doubt, Jim Crow was alive and well.

Perhaps this was why Nevada was labeled the Mississippi of the West, to shame the Silver State and compel its lawmakers and others to address the problem of institutional racism. Governor Grant Sawyer (1959-1967) met with stiff resistance to his proposed civil rights policies and legislation. His progressive administration generally prevailed, assisted by the passage of the federal Civil Rights Law of 1964. Integration in Las Vegas public schools in the 1960s, accomplished by bussing black children to schools in white neighborhoods, saw racial strife and riots in junior and senior high schools. Race relations significantly improved after Governor Mike O’Callaghan (1971-79) pushed a fair-housing law through the legislature in 1971.

Clearly, Nevada was not immune to the racism that permeated the United States following World War II. Its civil rights record, like other intermountain western states, was shameful. According to University of Nevada, Reno, professor of history James Hulse in *The Silver State* (1998), “Nevada was one of the last



states in the north and west to fashion a meaningful policy to discourage racial bigotry." Calling the Silver State the "Mississippi of the West" was a provocative rhetorical measure to elicit positive change in race relations, and it worked. Just the same, the moniker did not reflect the reality of Nevada vis-à-vis Mississippi.

Nevada has not been the only place compared to Mississippi when it came to characterizing race relations. At times, Indiana has been called the "Mississippi of the North." An African-American civil rights leader picketing the Pomona, California, City Hall on February 3, 1970 over racial discrimination in city hiring called "Pomona and San Gabriel

Valley 'the Mississippi of the West'." Hyperbole, no doubt, but by calling anyplace "Mississippi" you could get the media's and politicians' attention.

Photographs courtesy of the Nevada State Library and Archives.

Top: Pickets surround Storey County Senator James Slattery, protesting his status as "paid senator of the gaming industry in Reno," 1963.

Bottom: Governor Grant Sawyer meeting with leaders of the NAACP and other civil rights activists in the capitol.

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